Neon Silence (Short Story)

by Olson

Wednesday, 3:47 AM

The rain tastes like copper pennies when it hits my tongue. I'm standing outside Club Euphoria, watching the neon sign flicker, and thinking about how Sofia's laugh sounds like wind chimes in a typhoon. She's inside, probably dancing with some banker who thinks his Rolex makes him interesting.

I met her on a Thursday. Or maybe it was a Tuesday. Time has become negotiable since I started working the night shift at the radio station, spinning records for insomniacs and shift workers who call in with stories that would make Kafka weep.

The sky breathes differently at this hour. It exhales the day's accumulated sins and inhales tomorrow's fresh possibilities. I light another cigarette and watch the smoke curl toward heaven, carrying my prayers to whatever deity handles the prayers of fools and romantics.

Thursday That Felt Like Suicide (or maybe Tuesday)

"You're the DJ," she said, sliding into the booth at Tito's Diner like she owned the place. Her hair was the color of strong coffee, and her eyes held secrets that would take lifetimes to unravel.

I'd just finished the graveyard show: four hours of jazz, folk, and the occasional call from one of many Marias who insists that playing Joni Mitchell at 3AM prevents earthquakes. The kind of job that pays just enough to keep you alive but not enough to live.

"Depends what you mean by DJ," I said, stirring sugar into coffee that had been brewing since the iPhone 4 was announced. "I play music for people who can't sleep. That make me a healer or a dealer?"

She smiled, and somewhere in the distance, a church bell forgot what time it was supposed to ring.

"Both, probably," she said. "I listen to your show. Tuesday nights, mostly. You played Bowie last week right after that caller talked about her dead husband."

Sofia ordered black coffee and proceeded to tell me about her life in fragments: she worked as a translator for the German embassy, spoke five languages but dreamed in Tagalog, and had a scar on her left shoulder from a motorcycle accident that may or may not have involved time travel.

"Time travel?" I asked, because in this city, stranger things have been documented.

"The accident happened on October 15th," she said, tracing the rim of her coffee cup with one finger. "But I have a hospital bracelet from October 23rd. Same year, same injuries, but eight days later."

I should have walked away. Should have finished my coffee, gone home to my apartment and forgotten about girls who collect impossible stories. But I specialize in impossible stories, and I'd been lonely for so long that loneliness had become a personality trait.

Some Night Between Then and Now

We're in her apartment, which is decorated like a museum curator's fever dream. Books in languages I can't identify, photographs of places that might not exist, and a collection of vintage cameras that she claims can photograph the future.

"Choose one," she says, gesturing to the cameras lined up on a shelf like mechanical birds.

I pick up a Leica that feels warm to the touch. "What am I supposed to photograph?"

"Whatever you want to remember."

So I photograph her: Sofia standing by the window, backlit by the orange glow of streetlights, her smile half-hidden behind a cigarette. The camera makes a sound like a sigh, and somewhere in the building, someone starts playing the piano. Something French classical and off-key.

Later, we develop the film in her makeshift darkroom, which is actually her bathroom with blackout curtains and chemical trays balanced on the toilet seat. The photographs emerge slowly, like memories surfacing from deep water.

But the picture I took of Sofia shows someone else entirely.

The woman in the photograph has Sofia's body, Sofia's clothes, Sofia's apartment. But her face belongs to a stranger: sharp cheekbones, different eyes, a mouth that suggests cruelty where Sofia's suggests mischief.

"That's not you," I say, stating the obvious because sometimes the obvious needs to be stated.

Sofia studies the photograph under the red light, her expression unreadable. "Are you sure?"

"Sofia, I'm sure of very few things, but I'm sure of faces."

She hangs the photograph on a line to dry, next to dozens of others. Now that I'm looking, I notice they're all photographs of different women in Sofia's clothes, in Sofia's apartment, living Sofia's life.

"I collect identities," she says. "Some people collect stamps or coins. I collect versions of myself that might have existed if I'd made different choices."

The radio in the living room starts playing a song I'd never heard before, sung by a voice that sounds exactly like mine.

Wednesday, 4:23 AM (or maybe always)

I'm still outside Club Euphoria, but now the neon sign is sputtering and shifting, looking like words in a language that doesn't exist. The rain stopped, or maybe it never started. Sofia emerges from the club, but she's wearing different clothes than when she went in: a red dress instead of the black jeans and blue top I remember.

"You're different," I tell her.

"So are you," she replies, and I realize she's right. My reflection in the puddles shows someone else's face.

We walk through the city together, passing landmarks that shift and change when we're not looking directly at them. The cathedral becomes a restaurant, becomes a Buddhist temple, becomes a 7-Eleven. Street signs rewrite themselves and I start to taste copper.

"Are we dreaming?" I ask.

"Does it matter?"

We end up at the radio station, though I swear we were just buying cigarettes at the corner store. The building has grown extra floors overnight, or maybe I've just never bothered to count them before. The elevator buttons go up to numbers that shouldn't exist on a five-story building.

Inside, someone's been fucking with my equipment. The turntables have extra arms, spinning records I don't remember buying. The microphone hisses with voices from other conversations, other cities, other lifetimes. When I flip the ON AIR switch, the red light blinks “SOS” in morse code.

Sofia sits in the chair I usually occupy, adjusting knobs that control reality instead of sound.

"Your turn to listen," she says, pressing play on a tape deck that runs backwards.

The voice coming through the speakers is mine, but older, sadder, speaking to an audience of one:

"This is DZRK, 103.7, and you're listening to the dead zone," my voice says through the speakers, though I'm not speaking. "Had a caller earlier who claimed she could photograph tomorrow. Made me think about all the tomorrows that never show up for roll call."

The tape deck rewinds itself, playing conversations that haven't happened yet. Sofia's voice drifts through the static, talking to someone who might be me, might be someone else entirely.

On the other side of the glass, Sofia is becoming someone else, her features shifting like smoke, her memories rewriting themselves in real time. The photographs in her apartment are updating automatically, documenting lives she's never lived but somehow remembers perfectly.

"I have to go," she says, though her mouth doesn't move. The words arrive telepathically, tasting like goodbye and smelling like jasmine.

"Where?"

"To become someone who never met you."

The End (or maybe the beginning)

I wake up in my bed with a hangover that tastes like someone else's mistakes. There's a photograph on my nightstand that I don't remember taking: me, standing outside some club, gesturing at empty air like I'm deep in conversation with the night itself. The neon in the background is too blurry to read, but it's definitely spelling out something.

The radio is still on from last night, playing that song about the woman who loved a ghost. Except now the lyrics are different, and the ghost is the one doing the loving.

The radio is playing softly: my own voice from last night's show, taking a call from a woman who speaks five languages but dreams in Tagalog. She's telling me about a motorcycle accident that happened eight days before it happened, about cameras that photograph alternate versions of reality, about a DJ who fell in love with someone who might not exist.

"What should I do?" she asks my recorded voice.

"I was hoping you could tell me," I hear myself say.

I reach for the phone to call the station, to tell them there's been some mistake, that I never said those words. But my hand stops halfway, because I remember everything now: Sofia, the photographs.

Outside, it's starting to rain again, and I can taste the copper on my tongue. Somewhere in the city, a woman I've never met is collecting identities, and a neon sign is flickering like a dying hobo’s heartbeat, spelling out messages in languages that don't exist yet.

I turn up the radio and listen to my own voice talking to ghosts, playing songs for an audience of beautiful strangers who call in with impossible stories. I guess impossible stories are just another form of trade, and love is the most impossible story of all. Disgusting.

The photograph on my nightstand begins to fade, but I don't try to stop it. Some memories are meant to be temporary, like opioids and cigarette smoke and the feeling of recognition when you meet someone who might be yourself, wearing a different face, living a different life.

I make coffee with yesterday's grounds and watch the city wake up through my cracked window. The skyline looks different today. Buildings in slightly wrong places, like someone moved the furniture while I was sleeping. My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number: "Thanks for the time."

I delete it without replying, but my thumb hovers over the call button for a long time. Outside, someone starts their motorcycle, and for a moment it sounds exactly like a turntable spinning up to speed. I hear a laugh that sounds strangely familiar.

.